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ABSTRACT

Pronouns, substitutes, elipses, conjunctions, synonyms, antonyms, superordinates and subordinates, and part-whole relations all provide cohesive ties that help a reader understand text. A study at Britain's Open University (England) has revealed the way in which the perception of cohesive ties is achieved as children's reading ability grows. Explanations of the effects of cohesive ties must also take into account the writing of text. Most authors keep their reader's level of knowledge in mind when they write, using this estimate as the basis of how explicit or implicit they make the text. (JL)

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COHESION : AN OVERVIEW FOR THE TEACHER OF READING

A revised paper for the Australian Journal of Reading of a presentation made at the 9th World Congress on Reading organized by the International Reading Association, Dublin, Ireland 26 - 30 July 1982.

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Cohesion : an overview for the teacher of reading

They told me you had been to her,
And mentioned me to him;
She gave me a good character
But said I could not swim.

Many generations of readers have been amused by the poems in 'Alice in Wonderland', but few have wondered how Lewis Carroll achieved such humorous yet puzzling effects. In the verse above the explanation is quite simple, the writer of the poem has omitted to name the persons to whom the many pronouns refer. There are nine pronouns in this verse alone and although there are some tenuous linkages through the pronouns themselves, the author has not told us who 'they', 'she' or 'him' are. The reader can only gain part of the meaning; in this respect the poem is only partially cohesive and it is this lack of cohesion that contributes to its puzzling effect.

Readers come to texts with certain expectancies about the topic they are to read about and the language usually associated with it. For example, in a story they will expect to have the person(s) they are to encounter stated first or at least announced early in the text. Thereafter their knowledge of how the language works in narrative texts enables them to anticipate that, as the story progresses, those persons will be referred to by pronouns. But notice, the pronouns by themselves give only partial information; for a full understanding the reader needs to carry

forward the identity of the person being signalled by the pronoun. When this occurs, an instance of cohesion is set up. One such occurrence is called a cohesive tie. Lewis Carroll achieved his nonsense-type effects by simply omitting the persons to whom the pronouns refer. He did not, as it were, tie the cohesive ties.

This carrying forward process in reading is important for many have looked upon the pronoun as a backward acting cue. This probably springs from definitions of items, like the pronoun, 'referring back to its antecedent'. It is very doubtful if this is how reading actually works: it is much more likely that meanings are carried forward and integrated with others as the passage is read, the reader using the pronouns as cohesive markers.

Another form of cohesion, that acts in a similar way to the reference (or pronoun) system, is called substitution. Some small frequently used words, 'one', 'do','so', 'same' and 'not' act, as the name implies in place of other words that have already been stated In the two sentences below 'one' is a substitute for 'car'.

> I bought a new car last week.
> I liked the old <u>one</u> better.

It should be noted in passing that it is not the identical car that is being referred to as in the case of the pronoun, but the entity car. The use of this linguistic device helps to integrate the propositions in the two sentences and thus contributes to the overall cohesion of the passage. Substitutes can take the place not only of single words but also

verb groupings and even whole clauses. In the passage below which is taken from a well known children's book notice how the word 'did' acts as a substitute for such word groupings.

> 'Mum', said Elsie Baker, the ironmonger's daughter, when she got home. 'Please can I take an apple to school for teacher?'
>
> 'Well yes, I suppose so' said her Mum. 'If you think she'd like one.'
>
> 'Esme <u>did</u> ' said Elsie. 'So why can't I?'

Here <u>did</u> substitutes for 'took an apple to school for the teacher'. In this way the verbal substitute is seen to be in place of most of a sentence. There are other substitutes in this example, 'one' substituting for 'apple' and 'so'doing much the same as 'did'.

Another similar and perhaps more subtle way of achieving the same effect is by ellipsis. In this the author relies on the reader's ability to carry the meaning forward but instead of using one of the substitutes, evokes the same process but does not actually use a substitute word. Ellipsis is frequently used in speech and occurrences can often be found in written dialogue. Take, for example, the snippet of conversation below.

> 'Do you come here often?'
>
> 'Yes'

Here the listener or reader understands that 'Yes' implies 'Yes I do come here often'. The question could

also have been answered using the substitute form:

'Yes I do.'

The text in Figure 1 below, albeit a simple one, illustrates how cohesive ties link up with one another in chains creating what Halliday and Hasan (1976) call texture. This mini-story involves two characters 'the boy' and 'the story teller or writer'. The reader is helped to keep

Figure 1 about here

track of the former by anticipating the 'he', 'his' and 'he', and the latter by 'me', 'my', 'I' and 'myself'.

There are other cohesive devices in the passage, and these are the conjunction cohesive ties, 'Then' and 'Now'. In addition there are pairs of words 'came' and 'went' and 'ball' and 'play' that are associated with one another. The conjunctions confirm the passing of time while associative relations between the other words give us the substance of what is happening to or between the characters. These are the lexical chohesive ties. (See also Chapman, 1983 for a gentle introduction to cohesive ties). Lexical cohesion, accounts, in part, for the affective quality of texts and it has been suggested that these cohesive qualities derive from meaning relations that exist between the words as items of vocabulary. Involved are meaning relations like similarity (synonyms), opposites (antonyms) superordinates and subordinates (hyponyms) and part-whole relations (meronyms). The words 'forces' and 'armies' for instance have much the same meaning and thus have an affinity when within the same text. And, because they are opposites 'tall' and 'short' have similar attractions. The 'oak' and the 'eucalyptus' are members of the tree family

and so have obvious relations, as do the part-whole relation of words like 'engine' and 'sparking-plug'. Due to these factors, the occurrence of one of a pair, or a series, alerts the reader to the likelihood of the other being found in the near vicinity: the one will cause the other to be anticipated. And anticipation or prediction is the essence of fluent reading.

Sometimes the strength of these collocations, as they are called, is such that it is difficult to imagine one without the other. In the following isolated sentence one of a pair of antonyms has been deleted; try to replace the missing word using the semantic and structural clues that are present,

> When _____came, they found themselves possessed of a great deal of knowledge concerning gas turbine engines.

The word order provides some clues and prior knowledge concerning the subject matter may help you to make a decision which you may find difficult. However, when the preceding sentence is given most adults fill the gap using the word the author used. The preceding sentence is:

> During the war, they worked with Whittle on his aero engines.

The associative strength of the antonym pair 'war' and 'peace' is such that it is perceived very readily by most fluent readers the process passing almost unnoticed. It does however make a contribution to cohesion. It is interesting how many ten year old children when asked to provide the missing word, produce, 'he'. Can you see why?

From some of the early results of a research project being undertaken at the Open University it is becoming clear that the perception of cohesion is an important factor in reading development. When a gap technique is used (Anderson 1976) like the example above, children's reading development is seen to be one of increasing precision in the ability to re-make the author's meaning. The cohesive tie system acts as a network of connections alerting readers to the author' meaning so they attempt to recover it from the text. Thus children's perception of the ties is of considerable importance to the reading teacher for these are signals that keep the reader on the right track during comprehending. Furthermore, teachers can alert children to them in many practical ways.

The methodology of the project has been particularly successful in revealing the way in which the perception of the cohesive ties is achieved as children's reading ability grows. It was found that children attempt to remake the author's meaning in many different ways showing that they are aware that texts to be texts require cohesion. However, often they are unable to maintain all the requirements of the text at one and the same time. They may, for example, provide evidence of having perceived cohesion but be unable to maintain the structure of the sentences being linked by the cohesive ties. Look at the ways in which children attempt to replace the missing cohesive tie in the following passage which is taken from the Silver Sword by I Servaillier.

..... Under a dusty heap of brown paper, broken cases, the boys' skis, and some old boots, he found two long canvas bags. Their leather handles were green with mildew. It must have been years since anyone had touched them.

'Ruth and Jan can take this _____ Edek can help me with the other,' said the farmer.

(the deleted word was the substitute 'one'.)

Some of the poorer readers (10 years of age) put words like 'was', 'cows', birds' and 'bottles' indicating that they were hardly able to satisfy one small part of the structure. Another group put words that indicated that they were sustaining the meaning over part of the passage and were perceiving the cohesion requirement but they supplied a different form of cohesion from that preferred by the author. They produced words like 'up to', 'with', 'from' and 'to'. When placed in the gap, the structure becomes:

'Ruth and Jan can take this ∧ up to Edek can help me with the other.'

'Ruth and Jan can take this ∧ with Edek can help me with the other.'

'Ruth and Jan can take this ∧ from Edek can help me with the other.'

'Ruth and Jan can take this ∧ to Edek can help me with with the other.'

(∧ indicates ellipsis)

In these examples the children's replacements are approximating the author's meaning intentions. However, notice first that the construction cannot continue if Edek is taken to be the indirect object receiving one of the bags. Secondly, the children have solved the cohesive requirement after deciding that something was being taken to Edek, either making 'this' a demonstrative cohesive tie or creating an ellipsis in the place of the substitute 'one'.

Another larger group achieved a cohesive effect by either using a conjunction or in other ways, but now the rest of the structure is also acceptable.

'Ruth and Jan can take this (^) and Edek can help me with the other.'

'Ruth and Jan can take this (^) please Edek can help me with the other.'

Ruth and Jan can take this (^) for me Edek can help me with the other.'

These responses are clearly more appropriate the rest of the structure is no longer isolated and those children who put the word for which 'one' was a substitute were very close indeed to remaking the author's meaning, as in the following:

'Ruth and Jan, can take this canvas bag (bag) Edek can help me with the other.'

Out of the 474 ten year old children who worked this example, only 46 (9.7%) replaced the word by that used by the author.

Author's use the resources provided by cohesion to achieve the text's semantic integration, and it is clear that they do so in different ways. One early worker (Gutwinski 1976) showed how the stylistic effects of two prominent authors, Henry James and Ernest Hemingway, were achieved by the use of different patterns of cohesive ties. And more recently Irwin (1980) working with university students showed that passages containing twice as many cohesive ties as others had significant effects on the later recall of the passages by the students. Other similar results have been observed with children as reported by Anderson (Chapman and Anderson 1982) on research which showed a relationship between prior knowledge, the level of cohesion and comprehension.

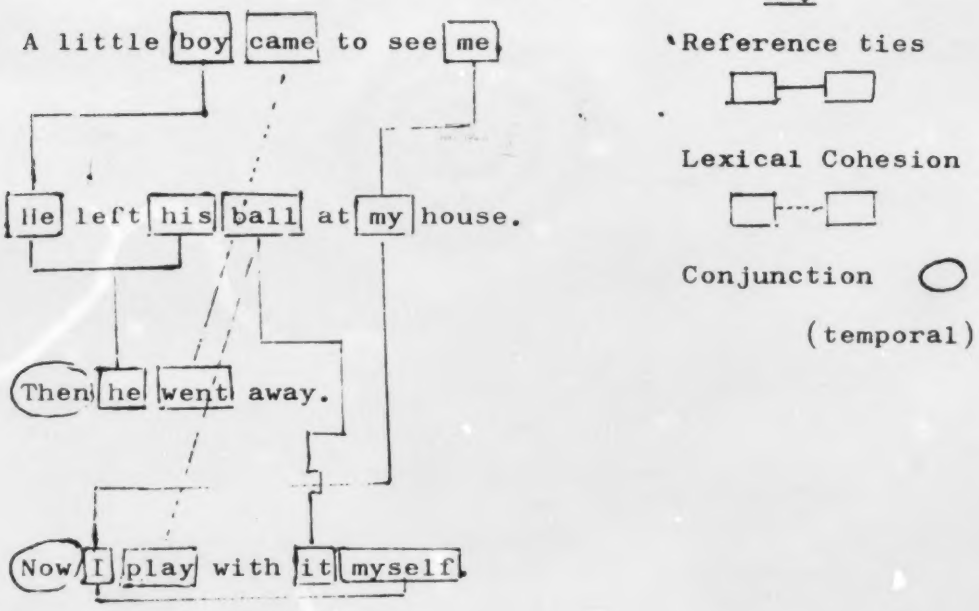
An explanation of these factors needs to take the writing of a text into account as well as the way the reader is comprehending the text. Most authors have their reader's level of knowledge in mind when they write. And their estimate of this knowledge will form the basis of how explicit or implicit the author will make the text. This will not necessarily apply to the whole of the text, but of particular phrases or episodes and even some of the detail within those episodes. Successful authors will build on what they consider to be the shared knowledge they have with their readers linking the 'new' to what they take to be the 'given'. In this process the cohesive ties play a significant role assisting to make the elements of the text more or less explicit.

In this the text-bound knowledge of young readers is crucial, for if they are unaware, perhaps because of insufficient exposure to the main text types used during school, they will find the cohesive ties, the

semantic integration indicators difficult to perceive. However it is becoming clear now how teachers can prevent problems such as these arising by judicial teaching of the part played in texts by cohesive tie systems.

Figure 1

Cohesive Ties: examples of reference conjunction and lexical cohesion



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